

Shiloh: Conquer or Perish

Nathan Buman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Buman, Nathan (2015) "Shiloh: Conquer or Perish," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.2.09

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss2/8>

Review

Buman, Nathan

Spring 2015

Smith, Timothy B. *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish*. University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 9780700619955

The Brutal Reality of War Sinks in at Shiloh

Many battles throughout the American Civil War impacted the strategic outcomes of campaigns and altered the course of history. Few battles shattered the mindset of Americans in both the North and the South so completely as did the battle of Shiloh, shifting how soldiers and civilians in both regions viewed the struggle. Most Americans had to confront the massive number of casualties and the ferocity of the fighting at Shiloh, and northerners and southerners soon realized that a long war lay in front of them. Timothy Smith tackles the extraordinarily complex battle and succeeds masterfully in providing an overarching yet detailed narrative of the entire Shiloh campaign. Smith claims that he will seek a “new way of organizing the battle,” and he does just that by illustrating the confused simultaneity of the battlefield (xii). Smith points out correctly the fluid and simultaneous nature of any given battle while also doing a good job of capturing the particular challenges that individuals faced at Shiloh when fighting or positioning troops.

Scholars have long trod the battle of Shiloh but Smith seeks to break new ground through his in-depth analysis of the second day’s events and by exploring in greater detail the social ramifications of the battle. Shiloh put in place long-ranging effects for the populations that warred with one another and it altered the psyche of anyone who thought the war might come to a swift end. Furthermore, this tactical stalemate truly threatened the South’s ability to succeed in the long term because it illustrated the vulnerability of the southern interior. As Smith points out, most of the rivers in the region ran north and south, acting as daggers aimed “into the chest of the Confederacy” (2) and the Shiloh campaign brought the Union army deep into the Confederacy. The local terrain at Pittsburg Landing specifically altered the course of the battle immensely and

Smith succeeds in tying the battle's developments to the rugged terrain over which soldiers fought.

Smith captures the chaos and confusion of the battlefield by following countless first-hand accounts and battle reports filed by unit commanders. He ties these often disconnected accounts together to enable surprising structure and clarity throughout his narrative. Smith wields a particularly deft hand in judging the commanders of both armies. He takes leaders to task when he should but sympathizes with those commanders who faced undue criticism by their peers. The second day of fighting looked much like the first as the Union army led frontal assault after frontal assault at the Confederate lines, failing to dislodge the southern army despite its early-day disorganization. General Beauregard's army held their position, however, until Lew Wallace, who Smith declares "one of the enigmas of Shiloh," maneuvered his division across the Confederate flank, held by Colonel Zach C. Deas (Smith, 247). Wallace's division smashed the left flank of the Confederate army, pushing it back and effectively dislodging the opposition from the line that they had established and held stubbornly through much of the second day. Despite his success on the second day, Wallace could not salvage his reputation due to how other commanders wrote of him in their reports. Whether Wallace had maneuvered slowly due to cowardice, mismanagement, or an extreme manipulation of the terrain mattered little because Grant's staff members, whom Smith calls "a public relations machine," effectively ruined Wallace public reputation (Smith, 238). Fortunately, Smith works very hard throughout his analysis to cut through the political and personal relations to judge the participants in the battle of Shiloh for the maneuvers that they did or did not make.

This book serves as an excellent example of military history and illustrates what a skillful historian can do to help future generations understand important battles and how they fit into the larger context. Smith consults a vast amount of resources to examine the course of the battle and presents it in an approachable way. Smith's timely maps illustrate the individual local engagements that he focuses on during the course of the battle, and his intense research provides reliable accounts of the arrangement of individual regiments and batteries across the battlefield. Smith's *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* truly has a lot to recommend, and any reader would find his or herself enriched by it.

Nathan Buman is manager of the Shelby County Historical Museum in Harlan, Iowa. He is a former editor of the Civil War Book Review.

